

BODIES, BRAINS AND SOULS

Last Sunday we talked about anxiety and peace.

How anxiety can become a way life when we spend our time worrying about the future.

When instead of placing our trust in God we fill up the future with “what ifs.”

““What if my savings run out?” “What if so-and-so gets elected? What’ll happen to our country?” “What if I get Covid?”

“What kind of world are we leaving for our children and grandchildren?

That kind of thinking wears us down.

Add the aches and pains and indignities of age to the mix and we become world-weary.

Not a good way to live.

But the good news I have for you this morning is: you don’t have to live that way!

There is a way to change your way of thinking.

God has given you the power to renew your mind, to re-program your brain so that instead of suffering from a daily diet of anxiety, you can be filled with fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

You have a choice.

You can slowly die on the vine or you can be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

So how do you do that?

How can we be joyful instead of world-weary?

Dr. Caroline Leaf is a neuroscientist and a psychologist with twenty years of clinical experience.

She is also a devout Christian.

Through her research Dr. Leaf has discovered striking similarities between neurophysical activity in the brain and the way the Bible describes how we think.

From a strictly physiological viewpoint a human being has two parts: a body and a brain.

Both of them function according to the laws of biochemistry and neurophysics.

The body is organized into complex sub-systems called organs—each of which performs its unique function so that they can collectively nourish, protect and sustain their host.

The brain is far the more complex and in many ways more mysterious than the body.

It's capacity for storing and retrieving information is phenomenal.

Scientists estimate that the human brain contains more information storage and processing units (neurons and synapses) than the sum of all the computers, routers and internet connections on earth.

But there is one aspect of human intelligence that baffles neuroscientists and has defied all attempts to explain.

That aspect is the fact of self-awareness.

The part of us that says, "I am," "I exist."

The part that can stand back and examine itself—that can function as both observer and the object of observation at the same time.

This is the most important aspect of being human.

The philosopher Rene Descartes, founded his entire philosophy on one assertion: "*Cogito ergo sum*: I think, therefore I am."

No machine is existentially aware of its own existence.

No computer, however powerful and sophisticated, has demonstrated self-consciousness.

So apart from self-awareness, we are no more than highly sophisticated machines.

Psychologists and philosophers call this "self-reflexive consciousness," or the ego.

The Bible calls it our **soul** and it is our soul that makes us distinctively human.

One way to think of your soul is that it is that part of you that God created in his image.

As God calls Himself “I am,” so He has given man the ability to say, “I am.”

Sometimes we call our soul our **will**—our ability to govern ourselves—to direct the activity of our brains and our bodies.

And while our bodies and brains are physical things that comprised of physical matter, our soul is spiritual.

It can't be physically located or surgically removed; it can't be photographed or artistically rendered: it is a spiritual entity which God has given to every human being.

But that doesn't make it less real than the brain or body—in fact it's actually just the reverse: physical reality is a temporary thing that had a beginning and has an end, but spiritual reality is eternal.

You might call it “ultra-reality.”

As an analogy, if you think of the body as the hull of a ship and the brain as the navigator, the will is the captain.

And the ship goes where the captain decides it will go.

Now there are two other entities, two other voices that live in us and seek to influence the decisions we make in our souls, our will.

One is called our “sin nature” and it tempts us to do the will of its father, the devil

We inherited it from Father Adam.

The other is the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Triune God who came to dwell in us at our baptism.

We spend a good part of our conscious lives listening to these two voices and deciding which one we will follow in directing the actions of our brain and our body.

Our sin nature tempts us to follow the promptings of the devil; the Holy Spirit urges us to follow the teachings of God.

While I've never particularly liked the old saw about a good angel on one shoulder whispering in one ear and a bad angel on the other shoulder whispering in the other ear, it's not a bad picture of how the whole thing works.

When we follow the advice of our sin nature, our soul gives orders to our brain and our brain mobilizes our thoughts and words and actions toward sinning.

When we follow the counsel of the Holy Spirit, our soul gives orders to the brain and it mobilizes our thoughts and words and actions toward Godly behavior.

The important thing to remember is that our soul--our will-- is the boss--not our brain.

The soul decides; the brain gives orders and the body complies.

Now you might say that this is just a fancy way of describing something we all already know.

And you might well be right.

But here is something you may not know.

The decisions we willfully make in our souls determine not only the immediate activity of our brains and bodies, **but also influence how they will function in the future.**

We have the ability to form, shape, mold our brainwork through the exercise of our will, our "soul decisions."

Our thinking takes the physical form of neurons traveling along certain neural pathways, from synapse to synapse.

Where our thoughts are concentrated, well-worn neural pathways are created.

The more our soul implements the advice of the Holy Spirit the more certain pathways are traveled and "worn."

The result is that the more the brain is directed to think sinful thoughts, words and actions, the more sinful thoughts, words and actions "come to mind."

The more that the brain is directed to think Godly thoughts, words and actions, the more Godly thoughts, words and actions come to mind.

The more you direct the brain to think sinful thoughts, the more you will WANT to think sinful thoughts.

The more you rejoice in the Lord—the more you WANT to rejoice in the Lord.

The more you thank the Lord, the more grateful you will feel toward the Lord.

The Bible is full of descriptions of this activity;

Philippians 4:8-9: "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy-- think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me--put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you."

Galatians 6:7-8: “A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.”

Romans 12:2: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

This doesn't happen overnight of course—it takes time.

It took time to create well-worn neural pathways of worry, anxiety, fear, guilt and sinful thoughts in your brain and it will take time to create well-worn pathways for Godly thoughts.

But take heart!

“...if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through the Spirit who lives in you.”

Romans 8:11

“...those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary...” **Isaiah 40:31**

“But you, children, are from God, and you have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.” **1 John 4:4**

If you lead with your soul, your brain will follow and your body will follow your brain..

One of the most debated questions in the history of the Christian faith is: Do we or do we not have free will?

The Bible's answer is that once sin entered the world in the Garden of Eden, man's will was completely corrupted and enslaved to sin.

Genesis 6: “Every thought of the inclination of a man's heart is only evil all the time.”

We had no free will.

But with Christ, man regained his free will.

“If you continue in my word you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” **John 8:31-32**

“If Jesus sets you free, you will be free indeed.” **John 8:36**

But you will ask: "Wouldn't it have been better if God had simply made us so that we would only follow His will? Then there would be no such thing as sin and no need for "soul decisions."

But is that really what you want?

There was once a couple in my former congregation who had just had their first child.

The woman was a believer but her husband was not.

The woman asked me to come talk to her husband so I paid them a visit one evening.

As I sat at the kitchen table with them the man told me that he was unable to believe in the God of the Bible because of the existence of sin in the world.

He said, "How could a God who is good and merciful and just allow there to be something like sin?"

Why wouldn't He have made us all sinless so we would always do good instead of evil?

He happened to be holding his newborn daughter in his lap and I asked him if he loved her.

He said of course he did.

Then I asked him if he agreed with me that when his baby daughter grew up, she would undoubtedly make some bad decisions and some sinful choices.

He agreed that she would.

Then I asked him: "Would you, if you could, take away from her free will to make those decisions? Would you take away her power of choice and force her to live the way you think she should live?"

He said no,

And so would we all say.

God has given us the power of choice.

It is called our soul, our will,

It is what makes us human beings who bear the image of God.

It is the great "I am."

Amen.

